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A Scandalous Proposal: Ethical Attractions of Basic Income

In their seminal early essay defending basic income (BI) Van der Veen and Van Parijs explicitly eschew appeal to ethical considerations (p. 641). However, I believe that the force of their instrumental arguments for BI is in large part due to a powerful ethical vision of the society BI would help to create. In this comment I will elaborate on how BI contributes to terms of social co-operation supportive of the self-respect and dignity of all, but especially of workers. This will place BI in a tradition of thinking about equality that has an eye on the truly political relations between persons rather than on their degree of desert measured by their moral rectitude, or the extent to which they achieve self-realisation through altruistic productive activity.

Self-respect is a fundamental human good. Like love and friendship, we think of lives without self-respect as hollow and failed, irrespective of the material gains and market successes they contain. Of course, one person's self-respect can be another's shame, but despite differences in the routes to self-respect, they share broad structural features that give the concept of self-respect political salience by allowing us to identify social conditions damaging to or supportive of it. Self-respecting people pursue goals and develop relationships according to values dear to them without adopting attitudes of subservience or submission to anyone. Liberals have long known that the political guarantee of protection for a core set of individual liberties is a key social condition for self-respect. But they have paid less attention to the idea that economic goods, and their method of distribution, can also stand as such a condition.

One significant ethical attraction of BI is that it would achieve an equitable distribution of the social bases of self-respect as realised in income.¹ Of course, money doesn't buy you self-respect, but it does buy you access to other less tangible goods necessary for self-respect that cannot be distributed to persons directly: quality work and/or quality leisure. Work and leisure have quality in the relevant sense when they provide a person with the opportunity to live according to her own lights without servility. If set at a level sufficient to cover basic needs, BI delivers these benefits by enabling persons to avoid humiliating jobs, or work repugnant to them, thereby creating pressure on employers to improve working conditions. Of course, there are probably some jobs which are ineliminably monotonous and dry – if not downright unpleasant – and so unlikely to provide those in them with opportunity for self-respect, whatever employers do. A further benefit of BI should assuage worries about the persistence of such labour in the market: on an understanding of 'needs' broad enough to encompass social life, BI would ensure that everyone has enough to participate in the associations of civil society wherein the reciprocal esteem of like-minded others so vital for self-respect is often experienced most vividly. In virtue of how the freedom of choice it creates for workers would improve the quality of their work, and how it would keep access to communities of shared interests permanently open, BI packs a powerful punch for those less suspicious of ethical arguments in politics than (some) Marxists. Although BI may not make work "life's prime want" for all, those who miss out do so by choice, and have compensating opportunities in associational life.

With such ethical attractions, who could possibly object to BI? Some Marxists and many liberal egalitarians converge here on a weighty criticism derived from very different conceptions of the acceptable terms of social co-operation: BI would permit people to benefit from the fruits of social co-operation without

¹ John Rawls places the social bases of self-respect at the heart of his theory of justice as fairness. However, I avoid explicitly Rawlsian arguments for BI here. For such an argument see my 'Basic Income, Self-Respect and Reciprocity', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2003, 143-58.

bearing any of the costs. From a Marxist perspective, this is a violation of the principles of distribution that govern both socialism (because BI is universal entitlement not conditional on labour contributions) and communism (because BI is received by each 'according to his needs' but is independent of any requirement that persons contribute to the social product 'according to their abilities'). From a liberal egalitarian perspective, BI violates the principle of reciprocity according to which it is unjust that the costs of an able-bodied, competent person's choice not to work should be imposed on similarly endowed working people through taxation of their income and property to fund BI: persons who make such choices should be held responsible for them.

What is the force of this criticism? Much depends on how 'contribution' is characterised. The liberal egalitarian version of the criticism operates with a narrow conception of contribution as constituted by paying taxes. Nuancing this conception brings it closer to the Marxist version: if what matters is contribution understood as participation in the shared life of society which is in some way productive, and if it is accepted that persons' productivity can take very different forms (even within their own lives, as hunters, fishers, and critical critics), then tax-paying is reduced to a sufficient but not necessary condition for contribution.

We are now faced with two very different visions of the ideal society. The Marxist vision is thickly ethical: the realisation of who we truly are requires joining together with our fellows through producing goods (material and otherwise) fit to satisfy their needs. However, the vision underlying the BI proposal as I have presented it is thinly ethical and political: routes to self-respect are permanently plural, and public policy ought not to require that we pass judgement on some of these routes as less acceptable than others. The costs of remaining in the political realm by refraining from judging some of our fellow citizens to be alienated, or morally responsible for their own bad luck, appear to be high only if we hold a detailed and specific account of human nature, or a some principle of entitlement to goods, in advance of thinking about how which principles of social co-

operation are justified. If the social conditions of self-respect have the significance I claim for them, and if reasonable routes to self-respect are plural, then it is scandalous to propose that we should adopt anything other than BI when distributing income among us.

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